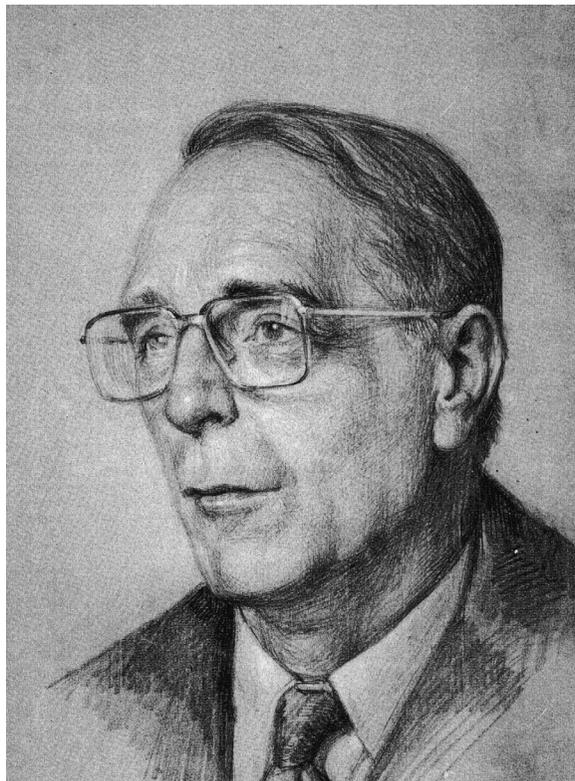


OBITUARIES

Edited by James Wiley

(To whom obituary manuscripts should be sent)

Karel Hendrik Voous, 1920–2002—*“Inside the crater the wood becomes a real lush tropical forest. ... In the densest undergrowth, in places where there are many moss-covered stones, we meet the ‘partridge’, the large ground dove Geotrygon mystacea, which is not at all shy. ... I am deeply impressed when one comes flying noiselessly between the trunks as a spectral bird and settles on the forest floor quite close to*



Karel Hendrik Voous, 1920–2002

(The portrait is a drawing by Henk J. Slijper, a study for an oil canvas presented to Karel on the occasion of his retirement. Henk Slijper is the same who illustrated Karel's book *Birds of the Netherlands Antilles*.)

me, watching me like a chicken and moving off like a woodcock, zigzagging between the trees, low over the ground all the time."

These are Karel Voous' diary notes on his visit to the crater of The Quill-mountain on the Dutch Caribbean island of St. Eustatius, written on 23 February 1952. The words illustrate the degree to which this renowned ornithologist was moved by a profound interest in birds throughout his life.

Professor Dr. Karel Hendrik Voous quietly passed away at his home in Huizen, the Netherlands, on 31 January 2002, in the loving presence of Henny, his wife for 55 years. With his death, the Caribbean lost one of its major ornithologists and conservationists.

Karel Voous was born in Amsterdam on 23 June 1920, and from a very young age took an interest in birds, which was to develop into a life-long dedication. Karel was a precocious writer, publishing his first ornithological contribution on birds observed in winter near Amsterdam, at the age of fifteen.

Even though he was plagued by a troublesome heart condition since his teens, his career in ornithology developed swiftly. He studied biology at the University of Amsterdam (1938–1945), where he assisted the zoogeographer Prof. L. F. de Beaufort, who became his principal mentor. During WWII, working conditions at the university became progressively more difficult, but Karel Voous greatly expanded his knowledge of birds by registering the better part of the collection of birds in the Zoological Museum Amsterdam (ZMA). A short note on two old mounted specimens [a Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), and a Willet (*Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*)] from Surinam (1945) was his first contribution to Neotropical ornithology. He also managed to safeguard the bird collection of the nearby Royal Tropical Institute when the building was taken over by the German SS. He earned his doctorate under the supervision of de Beaufort in 1947 with a disserta-

tion on the history of the distribution of the genus *Dendrocopos*. Shortly afterwards he married Henny C. Luiting, who for the rest of his life would prove to be "a constant and faithful companion in my travels and during my work at home."

Voous served as curator of birds at the ZMA from 1949 to 1963, acting since 1950 also as deputy-director. Through his extensive network amongst field biologists, and through exchange and purchase, the museum's bird collection metamorphosed into a collection of international importance under his curatorship. His period as curator was also his most productive period with respect to the publication of scientific papers, culminating in 1960 in the monumental *Atlas of European Birds*. In 1955, he had been appointed part-time professor in zoogeography and zoological systematics at the Free University of Amsterdam. He left the ZMA and became a full professor in 1964. Among many other activities during the course of this professorship, he acted as Secretary General of the International Ornithological Congress (IOC) in The Hague (1970), produced the systematic *List of Recent Holarctic Bird Species* (1973, 1977) and played a major role in preparations for and editing of the nine-volume *Handbook of the Birds of the Western Palearctic* (1977–1994). Owing to poor health, he took early retirement in 1975.

For Karel Voous, retirement did not imply taking time to sit back. On the contrary, he continued to work hard at home until just a few days before his death. He concentrated on writing several ornithological books: *Birds of the Netherlands Antilles* (1983), *Raptors and Owls of Europe* (1986, in Dutch), *The Birds of Sumatra* (with J. G. van Marle, 1988), *Owls of the Northern Hemisphere* (1988), *Swamp birds of Europe* (1992, in Dutch), and *Under the Spell of Birds* (1995, in Dutch). All of his books bear witness to the fact that he was very keen on quality and attention to detail. He invariably

did his writing with pen and paper, and never touched a computer. Probably thousands of ornithologists around the globe know him – an amateur-graphologist himself – from his letters, featuring his characteristic, immaculate handwriting.

Under the Spell of Birds was to be Voous' last ornithological book. It took the better part of six years, 1989–1995, to write this 603-page tome. It includes a history of ornithology in the Netherlands, followed by the biographies of 550 Dutch ornithologists, amateur and professional, active in the course of the twentieth century. The book is dedicated to his life-long birding friend Henk van der Lee, who had died shortly before its publication. The book demonstrates Voous' personal commitment to and admiration for fellow birders, as well as his sincere interest in "the personality behind the ornithologist." This quality had long since made him the perfect author for biographies and obituaries of remarkable ornithologists.

Voous' work in the Caribbean began with an expedition to the Netherlands Antilles in 1951–1952, accompanied and assisted by his wife. The Government of the Netherlands Antilles had invited Voous to make this expedition and financed it on the condition that both scientific and popular publications would result. In eight months, he and Henny visited each of the six islands and collected over 1100 bird specimens. A brief visit was made to the Phelps in Caracas, and Voous was deeply impressed with their collection of Venezuelan birds. This first expedition resulted in five scholarly papers including monographs of the birds of the "Windward" (1955) and the "Leeward" (1957) Netherlands Antilles. Furthermore, he produced three semi-popular publications, of which *Birds of the Netherlands Antilles* (1955) at that time constituted a milestone. This well-produced 205-page hardcover field guide with Dutch text and English summaries includes

notes on the conservation-status of each species. It is remarkable for its 22 plates, most of these reproductions in color of original paintings by Henk Slijper, a gifted Dutch bird-artist to whom Voous commissioned work for several of his major publications.

His 1951–1952 expedition marked the beginning of Voous' extended commitment to the study and conservation of birds in the Dutch Caribbean. During the course of the trip, he made many friends, particularly expatriate Dutch birdwatchers on Curaçao, Bonaire, and St. Martin, with whom he corresponded extensively. Besides data collected during his own later trips to the islands in 1961, 1977, 1979, and 1989, Voous meticulously assembled and filed all information he received from local correspondents and visiting Dutch birdwatchers. In doing so he consolidated a mass of information which might have remained unutilized and ultimately lost in amateurs' notebooks.

After publication of updated checklists (Leeward Islands: 1965; Windward Islands: 1967), his visits to the islands in 1977 and 1979 were specifically made with the aim of collecting additional information for – as he termed it – "a miniature-handbook" of the birds of the Netherlands Antilles. Written in English, this 327-page *Birds of the Netherlands Antilles* was published in 1983. As compared to the 1955 field guide, the book documents over one hundred species "new" for the six islands.

Apart from the two field guides, Voous published over 20 papers on the birds of the Netherlands Antilles. At the IOC in 1954, he presented an analysis of the affinities of the avifauna of the Dutch Leeward Islands, concluding that 66% of the breeding species are South American, and 30% West Indian. Other papers cover such diverse topics as the history of ornithological and zoological exploration of the islands (1954, 1967), the description of a new subspecies of the

Bananaquit (*Coereba flaveola*) from Bonaire (1955) and papers on waders, gulls, and terns (1963, 1965, 1977). He also co-authored several papers resulting from observations by his friends in the islands; e.g., on the birds of the Venezuelan Islas Las Aves (Van der Werf *et al.* 1958) and on the breeding biology of the Cayenne Tern (*Sterna sandvicensis* ssp.) in Curaçao (Ansingh *et al.* 1960). Together with George Junge, curator of birds of the Leiden (Netherlands) museum, Voous studied a large number of museum skins of Cayenne Terns, resulting in a thorough taxonomical paper (1955), too often overlooked by later students. Two more papers by Voous on Cayenne Terns in Argentina (1968) and Brazil (1977) show how he continued to be intrigued by the species. A paper on “Striated or Green Herons” (1986) was his last published contribution to the ornithology of the Netherlands Antilles.

Of course, Voous had been preceded by ornithologists such as Ernst Hartert, Stuart Danforth, and others, who all made valuable contributions to the ornithology of the Dutch West Indies. However, Voous not only made major additions but also brought together all observations in a comprehensive fashion. In doing so, he can justly be credited with having laid the foundations for Dutch West Indian ornithology.

When on the way home from his second trip to the Antilles in 1961, Voous visited Surinam, the other part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in the Americas. He was intent on studying the ecology and zoogeography of Surinam’s raptor fauna. This resulted in papers on “predation potential” of Surinam raptors (1969) and on the Snail Kite *Rostrhamus sociabilis* (1973). With one of his 13 Ph.D. students, Tjitte de Vries, Voous published on the systematics and geographical history of the Galapagos Hawk (*Buteo galapagoensis*) (1978). In all, Voous’ extensive bibliography includes at least 43 titles of Neotropical relevance (see Appendix 1).

For his first visits to the Netherlands Antilles, Voous traveled by boat, which gave him the opportunity to observe seabirds. The study of pelagic distribution and ecology of marine birds was one of his passions, particularly since he had studied a collection of Antarctic birds, assembled during the 1946–1948 journeys of the Dutch whaling vessel “Willem Barentsz” (Bierman & Voous 1950). Later, he published on birds collected at Tristan da Cunha island (1962), began assembling and filing at-sea observations of marine birds from the world’s oceans, and in 1963 started a series of short “Notes on Seabirds” in *Ardea*.

The significance of Voous to ornithology in general is illustrated by the fact that he published well over 350 scholarly papers and 15 books during his lifetime. Throughout the years, he also remained active in national and international conservation and served key posts on various committees. He has often been honored for his travails, in the Netherlands as well as abroad, and he was an honorary member of a number of national and international ornithological and conservation organizations.

Karel Voous was always dedicated to bird conservation, and in later years he manifested this in various ways. With respect to the Dutch islands, he was particularly concerned about the prospects for the raptors, owls, parrots, terns, and flamingos. His commitment to bird conservation is exemplified by his role in conservation of flamingos in Bonaire. When the traditional haunts of flamingos were threatened by industrial exploitation of salt (1968), Voous and others undertook efforts that resulted in the designation of a “Flamingo Sanctuary” where flamingos have continued to breed successfully to the present.

Through his many activities and contacts, Voous had a major impact on the fields of zoogeography, systematics, taxonomy, and conservation, especially in The Netherlands

and Europe, where he profoundly influenced generations of ornithologists and conservationists. The long list of Voous' students includes quite a few who pursued successful careers in ornithology and/or conservation. Personally, Karel Voous was deeply stirred by the intense passion for birds of the fellow "birder at heart." His greatness, then, lay in his ability to appreciate both the humble and the haughty, so long as their heart was in the right place. For those who knew him personally, he will above all be remembered as a kind and thoughtful man, ready to share his extensive knowledge of birds.

With the passing of Karel Voous, the few remaining birders in the Dutch Caribbean islands have lost their mentor. Voous did what he could to encourage those around him to carry on for him. His last few years were – amongst many other things – occupied not only with compiling new information, published and unpublished, on the ornithology of the Netherlands Antilles, but also with finding someone to prepare an

updated checklist of the birds of these islands. It must have been a consolation for him that Tineke Prins – his dedicated secretary since 1972 – and Hans Reuter of the Amsterdam Zoological Museum took up this task.

The lasting significance of Karel Voous' diverse lifetime work will speak for itself during decades to come. We realize that we are unlikely to experience someone like him again in our lifetimes and celebrate the fact that we were fortunate enough to have known him. He will be intensely missed by us, but at the same time will continue to serve as an enduring source of inspiration to all. For biographies, see e.g., *Limosa* 35, 1976: 173 and *Ardea* 80, 1992: 201. An 11-page obituary has recently been published in *Ardea* (90, 2002: 189).— Adolphe Debrot, CARMABI, Curaçao, *E-mail*: adebrot@cura.net; Ruud van Halewyn, Utrecht, Netherlands, *E-mail*: vanhale@wanadoo.nl; & Jan Wattel, Uitegeest, Netherlands, *E-mail*: oiseau@worldonline.nl.

APPENDIX 1. Papers by K. H. Voous, referring to the Caribbean region and South America.

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- Gerharts, L. D., & K. H. Voous. 1968. Natural catastrophes in the flamingo colony of Bonaire, Netherlands Antilles. *Ardea* 56: 188-192.
- Junge, G. C. A., & K. H. Voous. 1955. The distribution and relationship of *Sterna eurygnatha* Saunders. *Ardea* 43: 226-247.
- van der Werf, P. A., J. S. Zonneveld, & K. H. Voous. 1958. Field observations on the birds of the Islas las Aves in the southern Caribbean Sea. *Ardea* 46: 37-58.
- Voous, K. H. 1945. Two new bird-records from Surinam (Dutch Guyana). *Zoöl. Meded.* 25: 41-42.
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